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Corridor delegation presents agenda

DES MOINES — Corridor Chamber of Commerce members pushed an agenda of passenger rail, flood recovery, property tax reform, flood recovery, Iowa City's UNESCO designation as a city of literature and flood recovery during their annual trek to the Statehouse Thursday.

State funding for a Quad Cities-Iowa City passenger rail link is a "timely" initiative because of rail funds included in the federal economic stimulus package, said Nancy Quellhorst, president and CEO of the Iowa City Area Chamber of Commerce. The chamber is recommending the state provide \$30 million for capital improvements needed for passenger rail service. They told lawmakers about the potential for 70,000 riders a year, many of them University of Iowa students as well as patients and families of patients at the university's hospitals and clinics.

Although legislators didn't say "yes" Thursday, Quellhorst said passenger rail was the "most hopeful initiative."

Chamber members pushed property tax reform, a perennial issue. The 30-year-old residential rollback has placed a tremendous burden on industrial and commercial property owners, they said. Iowa City City Manager Michal Lombardo said firms the city is seeking to attract to its industrial park for companies that supply the wind energy industry find the community's property tax rates "challenging."

"I think (legislators) understand the problem," said North Liberty City Manager Ryan Heiar, "now they need to come up with a plan."

The Corridor chamber groups want to see a floor established for residential property taxes and asked lawmakers to make changes in Iowa's property tax structure to increase equity and stability to local governments.

The delegation of about 30 chamber members thanked lawmakers for a \$56 million disaster relief program approved in January and lobbied for more assistance for the flood-damaged communities.

"Flood recovery was our focus and will be for years to come," said Sara Mentzer, vice president for public affairs at the Cedar Rapids chamber. Cedar Rapids' need may be greater than what the state can provide, she said, but the cooperation of the state is needed as the community seeks recover assistance from the state level.

Iowa City also told lawmakers about the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's designation of the city as one of three cities of literature. Edinburgh, Scotland and Melbourne, Australia, are the others.

"We think that's an Iowa asset and if we get it launched it can have implications throughout Iowa in terms of literacy," Lombardo said.

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